What filmmaker Ken Loach makes of *The Spirit of ’45*

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The WSWS posted this review of British filmmaker Ken Loach’s The Spirit of ’45*, about the origins of the welfare state in Britain and the evolution of the Labour Party, in 2013. The documentary has now been released in the US, where it was not distributed previously.*

Throughout his lengthy career, Loach (born 1936) has persistently taken up the cause of the working class and oppressed, but, as we remark below, The Spirit of ‘45 *reveals his very serious and even fatal limitations.*

Political affiliations have obvious and definite political but also artistic consequences. In the same year Loach premiered his film, he expressed his support for the organisation Left Unity founded by Alan Thornett, who features in The Spirit of ‘45*. Left Unity and Loach hitched their wagon to the veteran Labour politician Jeremy Corbyn, who, also persistently and futilely, sought to breathe new life—and new illusions—into the right-wing, bourgeois Labour Party.*

If the decade since 2013 has proved anything, it is the bankruptcy of all attempts to put a positive, “left” gloss on figures such as Corbyn and in the US, Bernie Sanders. Loach’s failure to draw a political balance sheet and break with such pseudo-left opportunists, in fact, his deplorable and thorough-going integration into national-reformism has largely meant the end of him as an artist who has much that is meaningful to say to audiences.

The documentary *The Spirit of ’45* is veteran British director Ken Loach at his artistic and political weakest. The film combines archive footage and interviews to treat the nationalisation of broad swathes of industry carried out by the Labour Party government following the Second World War.

The film has a very definite political message and is obviously aimed at intervening in current political debates in Britain. It therefore requires careful examination.

The Spirit of ’45, Loach’s first documentary since 1998, opens with iconic archive material of young couples celebrating in the fountains at London’s Trafalgar Square in May 1945, at the end of almost six years of bloody slaughter. A narrator asserts that British workers had combined in the war to establish a force powerful enough to beat fascism. Now, in 1945, they sought not only an alternative to the misery of war, but also an alternative to the peace that prevailed before the war—characterized by poverty, exploitation and unemployment.

Workers returning from the battlefield demanded, above all, no return to the 1930s. The militancy of the working class threw the British ruling class into sharp crisis. *The Spirit of ’45* presents footage of a visibly disturbed Winston Churchill being booed down by an audience at a post-war election rally. There were still vivid memories of the part Churchill had played in helping create the misery of the 1930s and of his repression of workers’ struggles during the war.

In an even more revealing scene, the new Labour prime minister, Clement Attlee, announces his government’s plans for extensive nationalisation to a party conference after Labour’s electoral landslide victory in 1945. Attlee is visibly nervous as he introduces Labour’s new “socialist experiment.” Behind him on the podium, elderly members of the party noticeably indicate either their disdain for or lack of interest in the new course, or both. The scene makes clear that two different “spirits” co-existed at the end of the war.

On the one hand, millions of workers and their families were demanding fundamental social change. On the other, an anxious Labour and trade union bureaucracy realised they would have to make considerable social concessions to stave off the threat of social revolution.

A significant weakness of Loach’s presentation of this history is its failure to identify the radicalisation of British workers after the Second World War as part of a much broader European and international process. Instead, the film blends in a brass band rendition of the famed “Jerusalem” hymn, extolling “England’s green and pleasant land.”

In the course of its nationalisation program, the Labour government took control over a fifth of the country’s industries and services, including health, transport, energy and housing. The nationalisations laid the basis for post-war Britain’s “cradle to the grave” health service and brought major improvements to the lives of ordinary workers. In one scene in *The Spirit of ’45*, a woman recounts her father’s joy on receiving the key to his very first council house. He carried the official letter announcing his new home in his wallet for the rest of his life.

Such reactions were understandable, but a *socialist filmmaker* surely has to go deeper than that, and consider both the historical context of the reforms and their inevitable limitations and even elimination.

From the start, Labour’s program had nothing in common with a socialist policy of nationalisation which would be carried out by

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and under the democratic control of the working class in power. Huge concessions were made to the private owners in Britain. When asked how he managed to persuade doctors to agree to a national health service, for example, Health Secretary Aneurin Bevan retorted: "I stuffed their throats with gold." One elderly interviewee recalls in the film that the new head of the nationalized Coal Board was a former pit owner, notorious for his hostility to miners and the organised working class.

In fact, the compromises made to big business and vested economic interests by the Labour government played a major role in the slump in support for the party, which was voted out of office in 1951.

Loach, however, views this history differently, as a step toward socialism. "I think it's very important to remember that there was a time when we owned a lot of the economy," the director told *Screen* magazine, referring to the post-war creation of the welfare state. "We owned the utilities, transport system, mines and we invested heavily in housing for everyone—that was an enormous achievement for our country which was on its knees after the war. The period showed that people can and want to work together, not to be in competition with each other."

Interspersed with interesting archive material are interviews with workers who recall the dire social conditions of the 1930s and pay tribute to the benefits of nationalisation.

Other interviewees, however, have a very definite political agenda. One of Loach's main interview subjects is the doyen of the Labour "left," octogenarian and former cabinet minister Tony Benn.

Loach also conducts interviews with leading members of numerous pseudo-left organizations in Britain. The director is patently dishonest in his presentation of these figures. Alongside Benn, the individual most frequently featured in his film is Dot Gibson, who is also given the final word. The film provides the information that Gibson is the chairperson of the National Pensioners Convention, but fails to make mention of her political past as a leading member of the Workers Revolutionary Party until her expulsion from the International Committee in 1985.

In her role as chair of the National Pensioners Convention, Gibson has developed close links with key figures in the trade union and Labour bureaucracy.

Loach also distorts the biographies of other figures, or omits critical details. The film describes his interview partners, Alan Thornett and Tony Richardson, as ordinary car workers. In fact, Thornett is a member of the executive of the anti-Trotskyist, Pabloite "United Secretariat" and leads its British group, Socialist Resistance. Richardson is his right-hand man.

One could go on. Alex Gordon, who features on a number of occasions in the film, is not only president of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), but also a leading member of the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition—as is another interviewee, former Liverpool councillor, Tony Mulhearn.

To his discredit, although Loach is well aware of these political connections, he chooses not to disclose them.

Loach recognizes that workers have undergone decisive and negative experiences with the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. One character in his film notes that the modern Labour Party is not a socialist party and has been hijacked by the middle class. Another sequence in the film explains that print workers in the 1980s were let down by union leaders.

It is notable, however, that when it approaches the present day, *The Spirit of '45* has nothing to say about various Labour governments. Instead, the filmmakers choose to make Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher the arch-villain of the piece, who sets in motion the process of unravelling the post-war nationalised industry. The film skips over the manner in which prior Labour administrations had undermined the gains of the post-war period and passes over in silence the disastrous role played by Tony Blair and subsequent Labour leaders.

At the end of the film, Gibson intones about the necessity of older workers passing on their knowledge to a new generation. Footage of banners from the Unite trade union on a health service demonstration fill the screen. The message is clear: a new generation must put their faith in the trade unions as the vehicle for social struggle. This is a harmful message, which ignores the objective and fatal weaknesses of trade unionism under the most favourable conditions and in particular the global economic developments of the past several decades, which have transformed the existing unions into bureaucratic prisons for the working class, in Britain and everywhere else.

In a career that now spans nearly fifty years, Loach has deservedly won a reputation as a filmmaker concerned with the fate of the working class. He is one of the very few. It is difficult to think of another director who has so consistently sought to portray the lives and problems of ordinary people. Against the trend of most modern filmmaking, which ignores the working population or depicts it as passive or backward, Loach presents workers as real human beings and as an active social force.

The Spirit of '45, however, reveals the limitations of his approach. Loach's conception of the working class is closely bound up with the nationalist straitjacket imposed for so many decades by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Previous films where he has tried to reinvigorate trade unionism (notably *Bread and Roses* [2000] and *The Navigators* [2001]) are amongst his weakest. Reviving the most militant and determined traditions of British workers, both politically and artistically, requires a much more serious and searching working through of the experiences of the international working class over the course of the past half century.

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